Introduction

A major purpose of this work is to place Calcutta in the framework of India’s urban history without ignoring the unique elements in the city’s history. It may appear that Calcutta is not the best choice for generalisations on India’s urban history. After all, it grew basically as a colonial city, following a global tendency of growth of urban centres for the convenience of an economic and political power based thousands of miles away. Any study which ignores this basic reality is likely to defeat its purpose. But almost equally stultifying may be an inordinate emphasis on this global reality at the cost of some basic realities of India’s economic and social life and background.

The question of continuities and discontinuities arises for Calcutta, as it does for such cities as Bombay and Madras. Each of these cities had a black town from the earliest stages of its growth. Was it not, to an extent, a continuation of traditional urbanism, meaning thereby the complex attributes of pre-colonial port cities, riverine emporia and the regional urban centres? Could we not detect a segment of Surat, of Delhi’s Chandni Chowk, and of a traditional town in Bengal like so many period pieces in the spatial arrangement of, say, late 18th or early 19th century Calcutta? Could we not still wonder, looking at the traditionally most organised Muslim sector in Calcutta, whether it was a silhouette of a Mughal town? Such a thought indeed occurred to people who were better placed than we are on the time scale. In the 1860s a Bengali traveller, who wrote some good things among a number of bad ones, observed in the course of his peregrinations in Delhi that the real Chandni Chowk was not in mid-19th century Delhi but on Chitpur Road in Calcutta.¹ In 1872 Calcutta’s pioneer sociologist, the Rev. James Long observed while addressing the Family Literary

¹ Bholanath Chunder, The Travels of a Hindoo, London, 1869, vol. 2,
Introduction

Club in Burrabazar: "The position of your Society in Burra Bazar has often reminded me, in threading into its labyrinth, of the adage: 'One half of the world does not know how the other lives.' The Burra Bazar and the Mughal part of Calcutta are quite a terra incognita to the other part, and I hope your society will pursue its inquiries into the curious social life of the Marwaris, Jews and Mughals that inhabit the far-famed Burra Bazar."²

What were Burrabazar and the Mughal part of Calcutta as historical realities? Significantly, it was a Persian-speaking Khatri (north-Indian merchant group) who in 1869 addressed the Family Literary Club, composed predominantly of people of Bengali gold merchants' caste, traditionally residing close to the Muslim-dominated sector, on the history of Burrabazar.³ Little fragments of evidence from the late 18th and early 19th century source materials relating to Calcutta help to put the jigsaw puzzle together. But it seems a little historical reasoning is necessary before the factual evidence, not particularly rich and chronologically somewhat whimsical, is brought into the picture.

II

Islam, or rather peoples professing Islam, and allied peoples from west or central Asia tended to act as a major urbanising force in India for centuries after the serious weakening of the Hindu-Buddhist-Jain urban tradition. The penetration of India started with early Arab traders, followed by a major breakthrough by central Asian peoples who were not necessarily traders. The process of opening up went on at a

p. 278. The Chandni Chowk on Dharamtala Street in Calcutta is a misnomer.

² N. N. Laha, Subarnabanik Katha O Kirti (Bengali), vol. 3, 1942; excerpts from the Fifteenth Anniversary Proceedings of the Family Literary Club, pp. 27, 29.
³ N. N. Laha, op. cit., p. 389.
Introduction

quickening pace. India was not permitted to close in on itself, though the tendency was at a certain point irresistible for a deeply agrarian civilisation to consolidate itself on the basis of village kinship and rural commodity production. Within India itself a number of merchant communities, such as the Gujaratis, and some others on a less spectacular scale, possessed a network of trade and finance which far transcended the mechanism of a deep-seated agrarian economy, though they might never have bypassed the social pull of the overall situation in terms especially of kinship. Politically, the force of kinship and clan tradition worked with great intensity during the period when Islam was penetrating into the country, influencing the process of urbanisation or growth of new types of agglomerations on a reduced scale compared to the preceding one. Such agglomerations did not have the capacity to accommodate or reinforce the impulse to long-distance trade and to the formation of large-scale agglomerations in terms of politico-military and commercial centres at some crucial points in the vast space of the sub-continent. The Islamic and allied peoples from west and central Asia played a major role in providing a structural accommodation not only to the commercial impulse but also to politico-military organisation.

III

Taking the Mughal part of Calcutta of the late 18th and the early 19th century as the point of departure, we find stray references to the Mughals as a community in Calcutta, suggesting a well-knit group of central Asians of Iranian and Turkish origin led by some prominent community leaders.


* See Chapter II and Appendix VIII—“The Mughal Community in Calcutta”.
Introduction

This essentially Persian-speaking Muslim ethnic group had provided politico-military, cultural and even mercantile leadership at a broad organisational level for some centuries, and this leadership was reflected in some crucial features of urban development such as the cosmopolitan bazars, caravanserais, kataras and the fort-palace complex. It is not fortuitous that a late 18th century European artist observer made a distinction between the Muhammadan and the Hindu bazar, meaning by the latter the local bazar (the intention was certainly not to draw a sharp contrast at a religious level). For a very recent period in history an interesting description of the Muhammadan bazar occurs in connection with the economic life of Bombay city. The implication of the term Muhammadan seems to be not very far removed from cosmopolitanism. The Rev. James Long lumped together Burrabazar with the Mughal-Jewish (cosmopolitan) part of Calcutta. Repeatedly in the 19th century and even at this moment the term Burrabazar has been used to mean the organised macro-Indian type of business sector. It is not fortuitous again that Burrabazar proper as a functionally identifiable zone was very close to the really cosmopolitan (Mughal, Armenian, Jewish, Greek, Portuguese, Gujarati) zone in Calcutta.

For at least a few centuries before Calcutta started on its career as a large-scale urban agglomeration the major force behind the larger urban formations in India came from Islamic and allied peoples from west and central Asia. At what chronological point the Hindu-Buddhist urban tradition weakened to make way for the Islamic urban thrust may be debatable but not the fact of the thrust.

The centres of Muslim political authority till about 1500 were more like military camps than developing urban centres. The west and central Asian mercantile forces had, however, been active in opening up western and northern India to that phase of mercantile expansion which may be

1 B. Solvyns, Les Hindous, 1811, Tome 3, Eleventh Number, Bazar Hindou, Pl. 1.

2 See Appendix I—“Muhammadan Bazar in Bombay”.

3 See Chapter II of this book.
said to have started with the beginnings of Islam.\textsuperscript{10} New contacts were being made and the ancient caravan routes revived. A considerable degree of control over trade and finance was very likely to have been maintained by traditional macro-Indian business communities, Jain-Bainsab in sectarian background and regionally concentrated in western India.\textsuperscript{11} The medieval west-central Asian bazar had been taking shape in the Indian context during the period.

A further expansion of the bazar occurred with the expansion of Mughal peace in the 16th and 17th century. The control of the traditional Indian business communities continued. But the oriental bazar derived its structural synthesis from the complex groupings of Arabs, Persians, Jews, Armenians and others acting as middlemen in the trade between India and west-central Asia. They were the travelling merchants—the pedlars. Commercial contacts with Europe during the Mughal period led to further sophistication of the bazar economy, dominated internally by the banias of traditional business communities.

The bazar tended to remain an autonomous world with tenuous links with political, administrative and cultural organisations in urban centres. A lack of institutional growth in terms of at least politico-legal institutions is a characteristic of the bazar. A multiplicity of floating marginal operators below the layer of a few monopolists controlling the flow of commodities is another characteristic. The establishment cost had to be kept down to a level which permitted closing and shifting an operation with maximum profit gained. The life style was governed by rural or community traditions as modified by the exigencies of temporary residence in the bazars. The attitude was that of a sojourner, prepared to go to the ancestral village, often handing over business to sons and nephews. This did not, however, altogether discount the possibility of erecting stone houses or permanent structures.


In the context of the developed bazar economy of the 16th to 18th century it is possible to speak of a rough quadrilateral of trade—the two coasts and the two axes which connected the extremities of the coasts with the heartland of imperial cities like Delhi and Agra. This heartland was further connected with central Asian trade *via* Lahore and Kabul. Major Indian cities crowded round these routes and the hinterland of each felt the pull of the market to some extent. But this pull naturally disappeared after a point, as the cost of land transport became prohibitive. Thus interior India with its innumerable villages remained distinct from these other areas of trade and administration. As regards monetisation at the rural level, this was almost entirely the result of the need to transfer surplus agricultural produce to the town, there being practically no evidence of a flourishing rural market for urban crafts. At the urban level the production was basically for urban consumption and for a wide overseas and overland market.

IV

It is in this setting that a sophisticated bazar economy had developed in India. Elsewhere in the world the pre-industrial situation could not have been the same *à la* Sjoberg. Papers in a significant work on middle eastern cities perhaps indicate a much higher degree of urban population in the Middle East than in India and also a greater institutional complexity. In east Asia Japan, during the Tokugawa period, probably saw the submergence of politico-military castle towns in a virtually closed economy based on peasant agricultural production. The lack of an extensive foreign

---

14 Ibid.
trade capable of concentrating commercial activities in a favoured deep water port probably contributed to more diffuse city growth in Japan than in India. The overwhelming predominance of one political and commercial centre in a west European nation indicated an impulse—political and economic—that could not have occurred in India with its great cities of Delhi, Agra and Surat. India’s exposure to overseas commerce occurred in a political and institutional set-up that must have been very different from that of Japan, in which what was virtually a rice economy produced a dynamic urban impulse, and from that of western Europe where the institutional innovations of the Mediterranean urban world—especially the Italian city states—came to be adapted to national needs.

The relative isolation of the economy from political, social and cultural changes might be a characteristic of Indian history. The persistence of this isolation and the continuity of the traditional pattern of economic activity are graphically represented in the words the Europeans sometimes used in the 18th and early 19th century in describing the Indian part of the British Indian port cities of Bombay, Calcutta and Madras—namely that in another part of the town live the black merchants and other natives.

19 For a description of Madras see Milburn, Oriental Commerce (1813), vol. 2, p. 1.

“Madras is divided into two parts, the Fort or White Town, and the Black Town.... The Black town is to the northward of the Fort, separated by a spacious esplanade.... The town is the residence of the Gentoo, Moorish, Armenian and Portuguese merchants.... Some of the merchants at Black Town [own] large and elegant buildings....”


“Many of the rich natives here have habitations in the Bazar, residing in large mansions built after the Asiatic manner but so huddled together. ... The Black Town... spreads its innumerable habitations amidst a wood of coconut trees—a curious, busy bustling but dirty quarter swarm ing with men and inferior animals and presenting every variety of character that the whole of Asia can produce....”

For a description of the Black Town in Calcutta see Chapter I of this book.
For the whole of the 18th century in Calcutta the mercantile part of the Indian town or the great bazar had an overwhelming dominance in the "native" sector. The black or the native town is a feature of the colonial era but it also represents a continuation of traditional urbanism. It is a continuity in a different historical context. The arrival of traditional mercantile communities from the northern and western part of India continued steadily, imparting to the great bazar in Calcutta many of the features associated with the traditional cosmopolitan bazar.

The colonial setting created, to begin with, a new firm-oriented economic organisation which retained economic initiative in the port cities, leaving the traditional bazar a large degree of autonomy. The autonomy was essentially in the sphere of manipulation of internal trade and credit. The bazar could still thrive but the logic of its tradition kept it aloof from industrial orientation. The pattern of pre-industrial economy in most Asian countries asserted itself with a new force leading to the growth of primate cities, the rural hinterland being very little exposed to the forces of urbanisation.

Given this historical context and the continuity of a certain traditional urban organisation in present-day Calcutta and other cities of south Asia, certain contemporary issues acquire some degree of clarity. The situation of crisis in Calcutta is surely a product of some of these historical factors, and as yet no serious work on urbanisation has suggested that Calcutta's crisis is unique to the extent that at one point the path of historical development of Calcutta has diverged from the trends represented by the general urban history of India.

In this historical context—colonial, Asian, macro-Indian and regional—Calcutta does unfold a certain personality suitable for a serious historical study. The "city of dreadful

---

20 See Appendix II—"The Port and the Mart in Calcutta". See also Appendix V—"Some Representative Bengali Neighbourhoods". The last item but one is "Durmahata", which may be described as a busy Bengali riverine mart.
night", the "classic urban desert", the colonial city *par excellence*, is still a city with a way of life—a city where people have not forgotten to smile, contrary to certain assumptions.\(^{21}\)

\(^{21}\) *Chicago Daily News*, February 20, 1987. "It is not much of an exaggeration to say that only the children smile in Calcutta—and they only because they aren't old enough to know how miserable they are."